

Managing Volunteers

Ann Shanklin

Nonprofits Insurance Alliance Group

Did you know that many 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations have no paid employees? Volunteers provide a critical link between nonprofits and their communities by bringing needed skills, connections, insights and resources to the organization. In some cases, they also serve as valuable public advocates and ambassadors for the nonprofit. Some organizations only have a few volunteers, while others manage hundreds of volunteers – but the fact remains that volunteers are critical to the relationship between nonprofits and their communities.

It's important that your volunteers know what they can expect in the way of guidance and supervision, as a lack of clear directions and/or difficulty in contacting a supervisor can cause frustration and lead to mistakes. While there are many ways in which to manage a volunteer workforce, consider checking your strategies against the list below to assure your nonprofit is following the best safety practices possible:

1. Commit to providing explicit instructions for all volunteers, as they cannot meet expectations that are unclear.
 - Similar to a job description, volunteer position descriptions typically include a list of expected duties and responsibilities.
 - It is a good practice to provide a volunteer handbook, set of policies, and/or a procedures manual. This establishes expectations and provides critical information about the organization. Clear policies and procedures can also minimize liability.
2. Let volunteers know what they can and cannot (or should not) do. As an example, many programs specifically prohibit volunteers from offering rides to clients, or taking clients home for meals or social activities. Avoid unintended liability by providing explicit direction. Don't assume that your interpretation of "common sense" will prevail.
3. All volunteers should sign a volunteer waiver. If your organization allows minors to volunteer, their waiver must be signed by a parent/guardian.
4. Any volunteers that pose a safety concern or pose a threat to your nonprofit's clients or staff should not be permitted to continue participating as a volunteer.
5. Volunteers should be subject to discipline leading up to and including termination of their volunteer service. Executive Directors should not be expected to welcome volunteers just because they happen to be a friend of a board member or a donor. They have to have a role with expectations agreed to in advance.
6. Volunteer injuries need your immediate attention. If a volunteer is injured when providing volunteer service, it is important to conduct a prompt and thorough investigation. Your action plan should include:
 - Demonstrating compassion and concern for the volunteer's well-being; determining the cause of injury;
 - Notifying your insurance broker to determine if there is any coverage available;
 - Evaluating whether future incidents can be prevented with training, equipment or other measures;

- Evaluating the adequacy of the immediate response following the incident. (Were medical personnel contacted in a timely fashion?); and
- Identifying how the organization's response to a similar incident could be improved.

When using youth volunteers (anyone under the age of 18), you will want to think about their duties and responsibilities and whether those activities are suitable. There are several things to consider when engaging youth volunteers:

- In opportunities where children get involved alongside their parents, you should ensure the activity is suitable and that parents are briefed about any risks. In this type of activity, parents remain responsible for their children.
- For opportunities in conjunction with other groups (e.g., schools, clubs), we recommend working with the group leader to ensure they have appropriate supervision and insurance in place. You should still assess the risk of the activity and ensure it is suitable for the group. Your organization is responsible for ensuring the activity is safe, but the supervision is the responsibility of the group leader.
- For individual opportunities for youth, ensure that there will be proper oversight in place as they will not be as closely supervised as they may be in one of the two options noted above. At no time should a minor volunteer be alone with an adult.
- Any projects for which you are providing equipment, such as gloves or gardening equipment, have appropriate sizes for the youth. It's your responsibility as the nonprofit to ensure youth volunteers have a safe, healthy and positive experience.

In addition to ensuring that volunteers are safe, don't forget to show your appreciation on a regular basis! The importance of a simple verbal "thank you" cannot be overstated.

Remember that a volunteer is an individual who performs hours of service for you without promise or expectation of compensation. Any compensation provided to a volunteer, such as a stipend, may inadvertently convert your volunteer into an employee. It can also jeopardize the legal protection for the volunteer under the Volunteer Protection Act.

While the law provides some relief for the negligent acts of volunteers, these laws vary widely from state to state and are often misunderstood. And, don't make the mistake of assuming that your nonprofit will be exempt from liability because its purposes are charitable, or because the person responsible for the harm is a volunteer.

Managing volunteers is similar to managing paid staff. As with your staff, volunteers expect to be provided with rewarding experiences, treated with respect, trained as needed, properly supervised, and provided with feedback. Millions of volunteers across the country support our communities through all kinds of valuable service. And, they provide this service with an admirable record of safety. Since inadequate or improper training and oversight is frequently the cause of an incident and/or injury involving a volunteer, we hope these suggestions will help make that record of safety even better! Wouldn't we all prefer to avoid incidents and injury to people and property and spend money on direct services rather than on expensive claims against the organization and volunteer?

If your nonprofit is not a member of the Nonprofits Insurance Alliance Group and you'd like to learn more about joining our community, please check out our list of coverages as well as the benefits of membership, or simply send an email to info@insurancefornonprofits.org.

All members have unlimited access to risk management and loss control consultations, and those members with Directors & Officers coverage (who also have employees) have access to unlimited consultations with our employment risk managers on issues such as HR, labor and employment.